

## 14 November 2021: Mark 13:1-8 (Proper 28)

Let's focus on the last sentence of the Gospel: *This is but the beginning of the birth pangs*. Jesus told his disciples of coming catastrophes. We assume such cataclysms are signs of the end. Yet Jesus says such calamities are not the end but *the beginning of the birth pangs*.

After warning his followers of apostasy, false messiahs, warmongering, political chaos, earthquakes and famines, Jesus says such are signs of new birth. In the ancient world birthing was horrifying by our standards. Of course, there were no hospitals, sanitary regulations, medical staff, ultrasound machines, monitors, forceps, or drugs. Everyone was born at home, helped by midwives, relatives, or even the husband. Childbirth was raw, traumatic, painful. That, says Jesus, is what the beginning of the new age is like. What a contrast to the sappy, saccharine, pre-Christmas, Hallmark movie drivel that Advent is in our culture.

As we immerse ourselves in the childbirth metaphor we see, inescapably, that the one who gives birth is God. While the disasters cited are all earthly in nature, remember that the 'world' as such cannot be detached from God: *God so loved the world...* (John 3:16). God is not absent but intimately *for* and *in* creation, which God yearns to redeem. God suffers with the world, as Jesus on the cross perfectly demonstrates. Yet the world which God loves, and Christ redeems, is rebellious and fallen. For something, someone, new to be born something old, something already existing must give way, but the old wants to hang on when it knows the new is coming.

Consider this on a very personal level: most people are not ignorant of a better, holier way to live. For instance, Paul writes in Galatians: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control* (5:22-3). Yet our selfish will wants to hold on, perhaps not completely, but as it suits us. We might use a bit of generosity or love as a kind of seasoning. Even prayer can be more about God fulfilling our will than offering oneself to God's will.

The more intent we are in being a Jesus-follower, the more we are aware of this inner struggle, and we *do not shrink from it*. Indeed, the strength of one's intention to follow Jesus is proportionate to our willingness to enter and embrace the struggle because it is only in the center of such spiritual and real-life struggles that God births us into daughters and sons.

To be born and keep on being born in Christ is not for those who must have a smooth path and easy answers. Christianity is not for those who think they are just fine as they are and everyone else should change. This is true birth: old thought patterns, behavior patterns, speech patterns—the ways we live and move and have our being in the world—will ferociously resist as God's new life struggles to be born. When we sense the old self-will fighting with the new life in Christ we should rejoice and give thanks. It is a sign of our new birth; the more aware we are of such conflict, the more we can be assured that Christ is at work in us. The secret is do not fight the old self; we need only surrender to God's will at work in us. We should not despair even when we fail (and we will!). Our faults and failures are nothing compared to God's great power at work in us. Never despair; the only thing that is required is that we get back up again. Neither ought we fear: the very real labor and pain of being born in Christ are not and will never be the last word; the dying of the old self as we labor for Christ is real but dying to our old selves is not eternal. New life in Christ is eternal.

Each day we rise from sleep to a new day. Rise to new life in Christ each day. Let go of the past and press on. Do not be discouraged by weakness, for God's power is made perfect not despite weakness but in your weakness. Be of good cheer, hope with joy and gratitude for you are the apple of God's eye, you are the treasure of God's heart. Everything around you and within you may be chaos and battle, but Jesus' love for you is eternal. Surrender self-will and seek to know and do God's will in every thought, word, and action. Christ's loving-kind mercy be with you all.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.